

BOMB

Miloš Foreman

Author(s): Liza Bear and Miloš Foreman

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milos forman

**...if you love
the beauty
and freedom
of the jungle,
you have to
live with the
leeches and
mosquitoes
and snakes,
the tigers and
the sharks.**

LIZA BEAR

LIZA BEAR has just completed a book of short stories, *The Punishing Sun*. She writes on film for *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *the Village Voice*, and other publications.

A savagely funny burlesque/courtroom drama based on real trial transcripts, *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, Miloš Forman's latest film, wrings a hard bargain from the contradictions of American culture – and to maximum effect. With Rabelaisian flair and an unerring nose for irony, the film cleverly manages to satirize the grotesqueries of capitalism represented by *Hustler*, the hypocrisy of the religious right, and to pay homage to the First Amendment in one breath, somehow without ever falling prey to the scuzz that Flynt exemplifies. The film may well reap another slew of Oscars for its formerly Czech director.

Partly a wrenching love story between shock/schlockmeister Flynt (wickedly played by Woody Harrelson) and his fourth wife Althea Leasure (Courtney Love in a dazzling turn) who died of AIDS, and part ode to the Supreme Court, the first-rate, incisive script tracks the rise and fall of the Kentucky-born rebel's fortunes across three decades, from bottomfeeding smut peddler to First Amendment hero by default.

Flynt's outrageous challenges to authority (he famously wore the U.S. flag as diapers in court) and his constant need to outdo himself in print, eventually taxed everyone's patience, including his wife's and his lawyer's, and sparked intense opposition, not only from the moral majority. But the arc of his life, with his rags-to-riches ascent

as porn king, obscenity trials, attempted assassination, religious "conversion," and tenacity in the face of growing opposition, has all the ingredients for raunchy comedy and high drama. Having been permanently paralyzed by a sniper's bullet, Flynt takes his fights to a more exalted plane when the Reverend Jerry Fallwell sues him for libel in a Virginia court for a satirical lampoon (Fallwell having sex with his mother in an outhouse) and is awarded damages for "emotional distress." Flynt and his indefatigable lawyer Alan Isaacman appeal the case in Washington, D.C., make the Supreme Court laugh, and win a unanimous ruling in his favor.

In its heyday, *Hustler* easily outstripped its peers *Playboy* and *Penthouse* by being the first glossy to "show pink" (porn lingo for women's most private parts). It quickly escalated in sensationalism and sheer grossness, with graphic sections like "Assholes of the Month" and "Beaver Hunt," blending crude humor with debasing imagery and broadening the scope of its targets to cultural icons like Santa Claus and the Wizard of Oz (shown in the film), then focusing on prepubescent nudity and coprophilia (not shown in the film).

In a very different way, Forman's life has been as dramatic as Flynt's: he lost both his parents at the hands of the Gestapo at an early age, made his first three, internationally-shown films in Czechoslovakia, and, after moving to New York, won Academy Awards for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Amadeus* (1984). *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, with Woody Harrelson, Courtney Love and Edward Norton as Alan Isaacman, premiered at the 1996 New York Film Festival and opens nationwide in December. With the fate of the Communications Decency Act – declared unconstitutional by a 3-judge court – pending, and censorship, actual and implied, threatening the untrammelled exchange of protected speech on the Internet, the film's release couldn't be more timely.

Miloš Forman is at his house in Connecticut. There's no train station in the vicinity and I don't drive, so I'm on the phone in New York.

LIZA BEAR: Sorry I couldn't make it to Connecticut.

MILOŠ FORMAN: That's all right.

LB: Have you become a recluse?

MF: No, but I haven't been here for such a long time, only on Sundays or weekends. And I'm enjoying being here a little longer, because I have to build a fence for my dog, so it doesn't wander onto the road...

LB: What is your house like?

MF: It's an old farm, from 1748.

LB: Oh, does it remind you of Čáslav, the place where you grew up?

MF: The nature, the countryside, is very similar, yes. I guess that's why I'm here.

LB: Well, my first question is very, very serious.

Which do you prefer, Hugh Hefner's *Playboy*, Bob Guccione's *Penthouse*, or *Hustler*?

MF: Let me tell you, I never bought *Hustler* in my life!

LB: Oh, to put it mildly. Understatement.

MF: Right.

LB: Before you read the script by Scott Alexander and Larry Karazewski, what image did you have of Larry Flynt?

MF: It was kind of funny because when I get a script I always read at least 25 pages of it, and if it doesn't grab me, then I put it aside. This one, I read the title and I put it aside right away, because the only association with the name Flynt in my imagination was sleaze and exploitation.

LB: So you weren't bowled over.

MF: No. I wasn't bowled over to do another *Showgirls*. But then I was reprimanded by my agent Mr. Lantz who said that I should read it as a courtesy to Oliver Stone, but I hadn't known that Oliver Stone was involved because the cover page said Ixtlan Productions. I was puzzled. I didn't know that was his company. Of course, if it comes from Oliver I will read it because I respect him and like his work very much.

LB: It came with the right pedigree.

marble pedestal. But from Shaffer's play I found out there were other sides to Mozart's character too.

LB: There's a rumor that your friend Vaclav Havel recommended Courtney Love for the role of Althea, Larry Flynt's wife and partner.

MF: He didn't recommend her, but I was really torn between three girls, and I had a screentest tape with me in Prague. They were all wonderful, each very, very different. That made choosing between them difficult, because if they'd all been similar, after a while you figure out which one of them is the best. Havel and his wife enthusiastically picked Courtney.

LB: Who were the other two?

MF: Rachel Griffith and Georgina Cates.

LB: That was a controversial choice, casting Courtney. MF: We had to fight hard for her. We even had to pay the insurance from our own pockets because the studio just didn't want her at all. To them she was not a name.

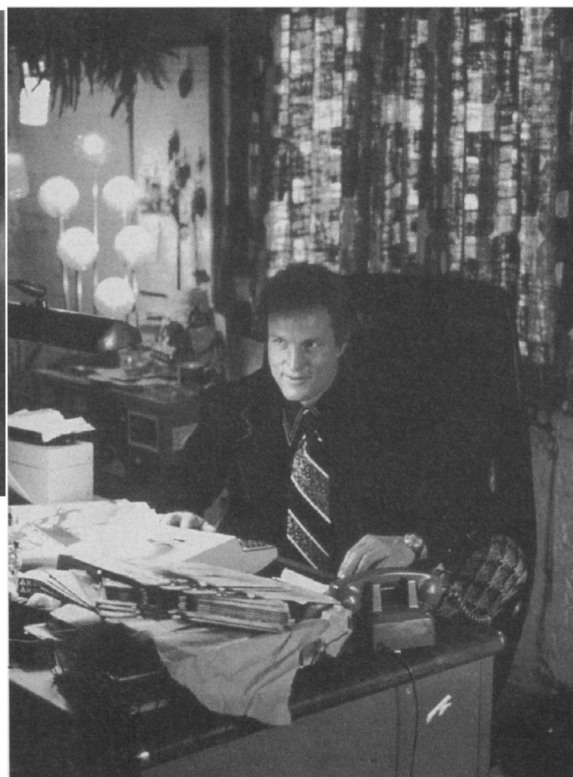
LB: Well, she's a name in the music biz.

MF: What do they know about rock and roll?

They have soundproof windows. I had



Far left: Courtney Love and Miloš Forman on the set of *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Photo by Sidney Baldwin, courtesy Columbia/TriStar; above left: Edward Norton as Alan Isaacman; center: Woody Harrelson as Larry Flynt; right: Courtney Love as Althea. All photos from Miloš Foreman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Photos by Sidney Baldwin, courtesy Columbia/TriStar.



a wonderful casting director, Francine Maisler, and she suggested a lot of people. Of course I had to meet them all. But what is most important that studios often don't realize is that I have to have fun to make a movie, and if they impose on me their idea of casting which I am not happy about, I wouldn't be able to work. "Fun" doesn't mean only that you have a great actor or actress. Sometimes I turn down a better actor for somebody who is not as good but somebody with whom I'll have more fun. If you have to get up everyday at six in the morning, Jesus Christ, and be with these people from 8 to 6 in the evening every day for several weeks, you'd better surround yourself with people with whom you have a good time.

LB: And then presumably it's fun for the audience to watch it, especially if it's a serious subject.

MF: That's right. Because the theaters are not comfortable enough for them to stay in their seats otherwise.

LB: Talking about unusual casting choices, you had

LB: Uh huh.

MF: And I never bought *Penthouse* in my life. I bought *Playboy* only once because there was an interview with Jimmy Carter. When I was buying it at the newsstand at the corner of 57th Street and 6th Avenue, I was blushing and had the feeling that everybody was looking at me and hissing.

LB: I'm sure no one noticed!

MF: Not that I didn't see these magazines at somebody else's house.

LB: Of course, of course. You made your last film, *Valmont*, seven years ago. What triggered your interest in Larry Flynt? (long pause)

MF: (emphatically) Ev-e-ry-thing. Everything. The story. The characters. The humor of it. And I felt that it's not meaningless to do the film.

LB: Not meaningless?

MF: It makes sense to make the film at this point.

MF: So I read the script and that was it. I realized that the sleaze and exploitation is one part of Larry Flynt, but he has other parts, the pros, which balance the cons and even outweigh them.

LB: There's a line in *Amadeus* which came to mind seeing Larry Flynt. Mozart tells the king, "Your Majesty, I am a vulgar man, but my music is not vulgar." I thought, you must really enjoy the paradox. Demystifying Mozart.

MF: It's funny, I was in London for two days casting *Ragtime* and my agent called me to see if I wanted to go to the theater. There were people in the room so I didn't even ask what the play was, but British theater is usually very interesting, so I said yes. And in the taxi I learned it was a play about Mozart. I wanted to jump out immediately! Films or plays about composers are usually the most boring ever. I want to hear Mozart's music, not see a revered figure on a

the real Larry Flynt play the judge at his first obscenity trial.

MF: Oh, that gave me a big kick. And Mrs. Giuliani, when she accepted to play Ruth Carter, that gave me a big kick too. I love that kind of thing.

LB: Also the surgeon.

MF: Yes. He'd really operated on Larry Flynt's spine, this man. And D'Army Bailey, the black judge. He's a real judge. He's a legend in Memphis, Martin Luther King veteran. He started the Hotel Lorraine and turned it into a civil rights museum.

LB: How do you get the non-actors to integrate with the professional actors?

MF: I do screentests with these people and you immediately feel if it clicks or not.

LB: Well, one-on-one is one thing, but what happens when, say, Woody Harrelson is on the set?

MF: That's why it's important to have fun on the set, because otherwise there are all these uptight, serious considerations of me-being-a-performer-in-this-important-movie — that's what makes you stiff. And Woody and Courtney and Edward [Norton] were wonderful in helping create a good atmosphere on the set.

LB: You wrote the scripts for all your early Czech films, *Black Peter*, *Firemen's Ball*, *Loves of a Blonde*.

MF: Co-wrote.

LB: Then after *Taking Off*, your first New York film...

MF: *Taking Off* was a disaster financially.

LB: Oh. You were in a foreign country, and you changed your way of working...

MF: For two reasons. I started out in Czechoslovakia as a screenwriter, but you really cannot function — you *can* function, but not one hundred percent, in a language and a culture which you didn't digest as a child. You just don't hear all the nuances. The second reason is — although I consider working on the script half of directing — because I want good writers to work with me again, why should I ask them to give me credit?

LB: Well, but you obviously take a huge delight in pointing out the extravagances in American culture. Do you miss the writing, or do you now enjoy putting all your observations into the mise-en-scène?

MF: Oh no, I don't. When you work with writers like Peter Shaffer or Larry [Karazewski] and Scott [Alexander] and Michael Weller, it's pleasure, it's wonderful.

LB: Are you a perfectionist?

MF: Well, it depends. There can't be more than one perfectionist on a set. If I find another perfectionist on the set, then I have to step back and stop being one...

LB: You mean, like the DP.

MF: Otherwise the film would never be finished.

LB: Give me an example.

MF: If I wanted to be absolutely perfectionist in getting the best from the actors, then I would kick the cameraman out. And the cameraman, if he's a perfectionist, he hates the director. Because I let the actors improvise. I let them move freely, and that disturbs his lighting. You can't have a cameraman-perfectionist and a director-perfectionist.

LB: A lot of people don't realize that.

MF: It's similar with actors. If the actor is a perfectionist and I'm a perfectionist and we differ...

LB: You've worked with the same DP, Mirek Ondricek,

for a long time, but for this film you had someone new.

MF: Yes, because that Czech friend of mine was working on a Penny Marshall film. But I'm very, very happy and excited about Philippe Rousselot.

LB: And it must have been a demanding production, with all those big courtroom scenes.

MF: Yes. Usually I never have less than 100 shooting days. This one was 74, most of it in Memphis, two weeks in Los Angeles, and one day in Washington, D.C. We also shot in the prison in some small town, I forgot the name, around Memphis.

LB: Did you read the novel by Jaroslav Harek, *The Good Soldier Svejk*, when you were growing up? Its humor makes me think of your films. It has great cartoons.

MF: Oh yeah. I would love soldier Svejk to meet Yossarian from *Catch 22*. Neither wants to fight.

LB: That wasn't censored in Czechoslovakia?

MF: No. *Good Soldier Svejk* was not censored because the Communists explained that it was anti-war and

learn by heart our "spontaneous" conversation.

LB: Here in the land of free speech, there are other kinds of controls at work.

MF: You know, Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich and even Al Gore are sort of proclaiming, No no no no no, we don't want to ignore the First Amendment, we don't want the government to impose censorship: we just want you to be more responsible.

LB: Ah hah.

MF: That's the first step towards repression, because that's imposing self-censorship.

LB: Sort of like the Hays Code in the movie



Courtney Love as Althea in Milos Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Photo by Sidney Baldwin, courtesy Columbia/TriStar.

anti-monarchy.

LB: One of your very first jobs was as the host of a talk show on Czech TV.

MF: I got the job when I was still at the university because I needed money. I had one decent suit, so I could go in front of the camera. The censorship was totally ridiculous. You had a conversation with some filmmaker, let's say, or musician, and it's supposed to be on the spot...

LB: Spontaneous.

MF: Spontaneous. But in Communist countries you had to submit every single word and line to the censors beforehand. And if you deviated from that, you were in trouble.

LB: But if you're going on live, how could they control it? They take you off the air?

MF: No, they wouldn't stop it but the next day they would fire me. And not only that, I'd probably have to go and work in the coal mine.

LB: That's pretty drastic.

MF: So I and whoever I was interviewing, we had to

industry in the thirties.

MF: "If I don't want to be attacked tomorrow by Gingrich, I'd better tone this down" — that kind of thinking is probably even worse than outright censorship.

LB: U.S. law is pretty convoluted. Did you have to learn a lot about the workings of the libel laws doing this movie?

MF: Yeah. Boring.

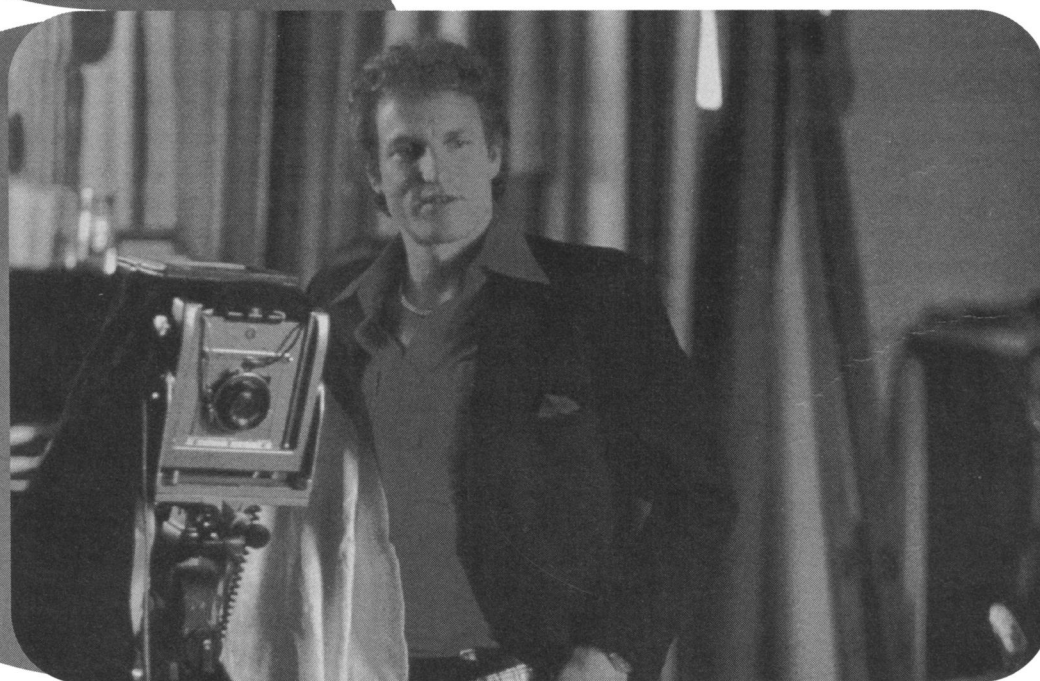
LB: In the script, the main opposition to *Hustler* comes from the Reverend Jerry Fallwell and the Moral Majority. I was wondering why the "radical feminist" protests that took place against the more obnoxious *Hustler* covers, like the image of a woman going through a meat grinder with the caption

"Grade A Pink," weren't also included.

MF: It's there, it's there. Althea, Flynt's wife, is furious. She tells Larry people are vomiting, puking. That's exactly what she's pointing at when she says it, the meat grinder.

LB: Oh, I see, so you felt that Althea represented the feminist objections. You did it through her character, is that it?

MF: Yes. But I'll tell you something — at the time, Jerry Fallwell was not at all discredited as the ridiculous character he is now. He was as powerful as this guy, what's his name, Ralph Reed.



Woody Harrelson as Larry Flynt in Milos Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. Photo by Sidney Baldwin, courtesy Columbia/TriStar.

LB: Oh yes, from the Christian Coalition. Dreadful.

MF: Jerry Fallwell was as powerful and as eloquent and as charming as Ralph Reed is now.

LB: I understand what you're saying. In a way, I think Ralph Reed is more dangerous because he has this terrible clean image. At least Jerry Fallwell, you look at him and you can tell he's devious. But Ralph Reed is the cleancut all-American boy.

MF: Well, Fallwell was a little thinner back then, so he looked a lot more respectable in the seventies.

LB: Yes, but if you look at his mouth, he looks like he's a hypocrite.

MF: You are right. The beatific smile always on his

face. Really suspicious from the beginning. From the word go.

LB: The mass media are so afraid of not being fair to Ralph Reed that people like Charlie Rose bend over backwards to give him time on TV. So have you made your peace with Czechoslovakia? You went back to Prague to shoot *Amadeus*.

MF: Well, no, in the early eighties Czechoslovakia was still under the Communists. But if *Amadeus* had not been shot in Czechoslovakia, the film would never have been done.

LB: Really. Why not?

MF: We could only shoot in three cities: Vienna, Budapest or Prague. Nowhere else would have the right architecture. Vienna was too expensive. We would never have found the money to shoot there. Budapest is so damaged by different wars in the last two centuries that you will not find a street where you don't suddenly have two or three modern buildings. And to build sets somewhere, nobody would

pay for that. So the only solution was to do it in Prague. And you know, to make *Amadeus*, I would have gone into cahoots with the devil.

LB: It was that important to you, huh?

MF: Yes.

LB: But there was trouble about you getting back in to Czechoslovakia?

MF: I didn't know if they would let me in. Since I became an American citizen in 1977, I applied twice for a visa and they always declined. So I was a little nervous. But this time when I asked for a visa to do business, to bring in dollars, they gave me the visa!

LB: I see.

MF: Dollar has the same smell for everybody. For the capitalists, communists, fascists. The power of the dollar. Which, by the way, is a Czech word.

LB: What is?

MF: Dollar. In the fifteenth century it was minted in Joachimstov in Bohemia. That's where they started to mint coins. They called them *Joachimstovallor*. Later, it was just *tallor* and it became dollar.

LB: You've been back to Prague fairly recently.

MF: I was there about ten days ago, yes.

LB: So have they absorbed more of the good or the bad from Western society?

MF: Both. They're lapping it all up. They're going crazy about it. It's very difficult for these countries to get used to the fact that yes, if you love the beauty and freedom of the jungle, you have to live with the leeches and mosquitoes and snakes, the tigers and the sharks. It's difficult for former Communist countries. They would love to have all the freedom and beauty of the free world, but first they have to kill off half of the animals.

LB: The moral of the Larry Flynt film is tolerance, at least in print, even for things that are hateful. From the response to the film so far, do you feel you got that point across?

MF: I hope so. I really believe that freedom of expression is absolute.

LB: Oh you do? Regardless of the consequences?

MF: Regardless of the consequences. That's the price we have to pay.

LB: Right. I suppose we tend to take it for granted. But what if someone's freedom of self-expression intrudes on someone else's, you know, well-being...

MF: Look, how should I explain it? The fanatical conservatives, they will always demand law and order, censorship, control. The fanatical liberals will always demand that freedom of expression is absolute. The problem is that the liberals will never win over the fanatical conservatives.

LB: Why is that?

MF: Because it's ridiculous. You really can't give a hundred percent absolute freedom of speech. You can't do that.

LB: You can't shout "fire" in a crowded theater, you mean.

MF: Right.

LB: So there have to be limits. And that's the difficult part, knowing exactly where to place the controls. And who does the placing.

MF: Right. But if you stop fighting for absolute freedom, then the conservatives will win. Look at what happened when the people in Russia and Czechoslovakia relaxed. The fanatics, the conservatives, won.

LB: And at this point in U.S. history it's important because the right has made such huge inroads.

MF: You never find a country or have a society in which you can really go and scream "fire" in every theater. But — you had a Hitler. You had a Stalin. You have Ayatollahs.

LB: Do you think that's our biggest threat right now?

MF: No, because in this country, people will never stop fighting for the freedom of expression. And that's why I am absolutely positive that nothing so extreme will happen here. But you had the McCarthy era. That was probably as far as this country can go. You have to fight to maintain the freedom you have every day. Relax, and you will go to the right. So far, so good. People are not different here or there. There are a lot of potential fascists and communists and fanatics in this country too, and the only way these people are kept in check is by a free press. A free press is the only way to stop things from going to extremes. ☺